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ABSTRACT

Texas is divided into 20 regions served by intermediate education agencies offering school districts the opportunity to receive specialized services normally beyond the reach of school systems. This report examines how one such regional educational agency in Region 20, which serves 50 districts in 14 counties, is organized to provide evaluation services to these districts. The process whereby the agency created an evaluation unit, organizationally independent of the programs it evaluates, is outlined. In addition some evaluation instruments utilized by the unit are described. Such instruments include the Levels of Use of the Innovation (a technique for collecting interview data), and the Using Evaluation Data Form which is prepared for all final Evaluation reports and documents the utilization of evaluation findings. The main body of the paper addresses issues regarding: (1) the funding of evaluation and research by federal and state competetive grants, special projects, and district contracts; (2) the relationship of the evaluation unit to the districts utilizing the services; (3) decision making regarding which evaluation projects are undertaken; (4) successes and problems associated with the use of regional evaluation services; and (5) changes which may facilitate more effective research and evaluation. (Author/AEF)

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RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN REGIONAL EDUCATION AGENCIES: A TEXAS PERSPECTIVE

by

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A Symposium given at the annual meeting of AERA held in Los Angeles, April 1981.

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The State of Texas is divided into 20 regions served by intermediate education agencies. Established as part of the Public Education System of Texas in 1967, the service agencies offer school districts and teachers an opportunity to receive specialized services which normally would be beyond the reach of the average-sized school system. By participating in programs with intermediate agencies, school systems take advantage of the cost saving benefits and program financing and planning which result from cooperative efforts. They also realize additional funding and services that are available from state and federal services for regional programs of this type.

One of these 20 Texas centers, Education Service Center Region 20 (Region 20), located in San Antonio, provides services and programs to 50 school districts in a 14-county area of South Texas. In 1980-81 the center provided over 60 programs and services, many funded from state and federal competitive grants. The center has a $10 million budget and employs over 400 personnel.

In 1977, ESC-20 set up an evaluation office. The function of the office was to evaluate all center programs and services and to provide feedback on the effectiveness of these offerings. Committed to the concept of program evaluation, the Executive Director and Board of Directors created the component so that it was organizationally independent of the programs it evaluates. Moreover, the office manages its own monies. The evaluation office

embraces a philosophy of data utilization supported by a formative approach to evaluation, where project and evaluation personnel work in concert. Important in actualizing this approach is that evaluation staff need to have strong interpersonal skills and be good communicators. Professional staff typically have a background in either school counseling or psychology.

EVALUATION PRODUCTS

The evaluation focus is on collecting information from school district personnel. If the program under evaluation is center-sponsored, the information is collected for center change agents: if district-sponsored, the findings are reviewed by district facilitators (administrators). In addition to process and product evaluation information typically collected by most evaluation offices, Region 20 has two rather unique products. Interview data is collected from over 30 curricular projects using an interview technique called Levels of Use of the Innovation (Hall and Loucks, 1977). The technique, which was developed at the University of Texas in Austin, has been modified by the evaluation office during the past four years (Roecks and Andrews, 1980). A popular service has been training district personnel in using Levels of Use. Executive summaries, prepared for all final evaluation reports, contain a form documenting use of evaluation findings, the second unique product. The form has received national visibility, and has been requested by evaluation offices across the United States. An example of the form is shown in Appendix 2.

In 1981, the office was made up of 14 full-time and a strong cadre of clerical staff, many of whom were part-time. The evaluation office

has a coordinator and three work units. Two units evaluate center services and one provides direct evaluation services to districts. Within each working unit are a manager, an evaluator, evaluation assistant(s), and clerical support. (See Appendix 1 for an organization chart.) Project evaluation is carried out as a team effort, capitalizing on the various roles and abilities of available staff. Evaluation staff record time spent on each project. Records are managed by a computerized time and effort system (Roecks and Flores, 1981). Projects are assigned to work units with individual staff being responsible for four to twelve evaluations, depending on project characteristics.

SYMPOSIUM CONSIDERATIONS

The continuity for this symposium is guaranteed by having each of the four papers, of which this is one, address a common purpose; namely, "to explore how regional education service agencies in four states are organized to provide evaluation services to the local districts." This purpose is addressed by five central issues, each representing a major section in the following pages:

I. Funding of evaluation and research activities.

II. The relationship of the regional evaluation unit to school districts that utilize evaluation services.

III. How decisions are made regarding which evaluation studies will and will not be undertaken.

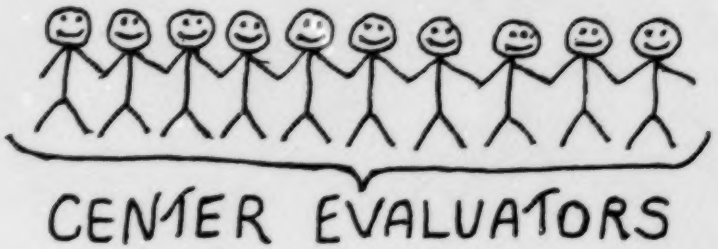
IV. Successes and/or problems associated with the use of regional agencies to provide evaluation services.

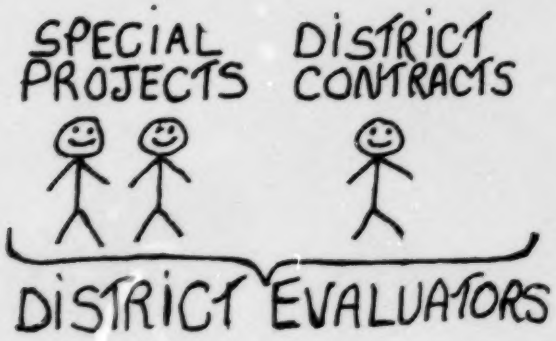
V. Changes that need to be made to make research and evaluation units more effective.

Evaluation activity is not a high priority for most Texas education service centers (ESCs). Each of the 20 ESCs has a person dedicated to meeting district planning and evaluation requests. Often this person works in the area of school accreditation. Those ESCs have three or four staff dedicated to serving district evaluation needs in the areas of testing, achievement monitoring by computer and/or needs assessment. Three or four ESCs are beginning to evaluate the effectiveness of ESC programs offered to districts. Comparatively, Region 20 has the best developed internal evaluation; several other ESCs provide a broader range of evaluation services to districts--especially in the area of student monitoring. Issues faced by Region 20 Evaluation should parallel those of the five largest Texas ESCs.

I. FUNDING

Funding for evaluation is from three sources. The largest source is federal and state competitive grants, where evaluation examines the effectiveness of training. Since 1977, Region 20 has carried out over 200 evaluations for Center projects totalling $15,000,000. A smaller amount of funding comes from special projects. These include technical assistance for schools having Title I Migrant Programs, a research study on the effectiveness of nutrition education, and direct evaluation support for two district-based center programs. A third source, representing more limited funding, comes from contract work with larger districts. How the office of 14 full-time evaluation staff are funded is depicted below.





II. RELATIONSHIP OF REGION 20 EVALUATION TO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

How do school districts within Region 20 meet their evaluation needs? Districts under 10,000 students usually assign evaluation responsibilities to a person with no formal evaluation training. In some districts, evaluation is not carried out. An estimated 60 percent of districts with over 1,000 students contract with outside agencies for some form of evaluation. Larger districts (over 10,000 students) assign a person to carry out evaluation, usually for Title I; one district has their own evaluation unit; all contract for additional evaluation support.

Districts participating in Center programs receive some form of support from Region 20 Evaluation. The equivalent of four full-time staff provide evaluation services to 26 of 50 districts. Findings from Table 1 suggest the larger the district, the greater the need of evaluation support. Five of six large districts (over 10,000 students) and 16 of 22 medium-sized districts (from 1,000 to 10,000) receive evaluation support. Evaluation support to small districts (under 1,000) is limited to the 5 (out of 22) that have Title I Migrant programs.

TABLE 1

Region 20 Evaluation Support
By District Size

Evaluation Activity	District Size: Under 1,000 (N=22)	1,000 - 10,000 (N=22)	Over 10,000 (N=6)
Evaluation of Center programs delivered to districts	District chose limited Center services; services evaluated	Districts chose many Center services; services evaluated	Districts have most Center services; services evaluated
Title I Migrant evaluation support	5 of 22 districts have Migrant	12 of 22 districts have Migrant	5 of 6 districts have Migrant
Contracting for program evaluation with Region 20	None	5 of 22 districts contract with Region 20; 1 additional district outside Region 20 contracts	4 of 6 districts have contracts with Region 20
Nutrition Research Study	None	2 districts	1 district

III. WHETHER OR NOT TO EVALUATE

By policy, all Center programs are evaluated. Evaluation funding is a fixed proportion of each budget. After costing each evaluation product, evaluation and program personnel determine priorities consistent with available evaluation resources. Not all program aspects can be evaluated. Should certain Center programs not be evaluated? Perhaps. Such programs are characterized by fuzzy objectives and uncertain definitions. Evaluation resources are spent, sometimes in vain, setting program direction.

Unlike evaluation offices in many other intermediate agencies, Region 20 does not have monies for general evaluation support to districts. Except for a few special programs, districts receive evaluation by contracting for services. Although negotiations have fallen through on several occasions, whether or not to evaluate has not become a salient issue. This may be due to the relatively small number of district requests. A decision not to evaluate would be based on the following:

> At the same time, we should recognize that for particular programs there may be some reason why a decision not to evaluate in any formal sense might be made: If the program is a one time effort; if as a result of the treatment, the clients will be placed in a position to adversely influence the health, safety, or well being of others; if the constraints in the situation prevent professionally responsible evaluation; if there is no possibility that the results will be acted upon decisions about program installation, continuation, or improvement; or if there is no one interested or informed enough to carry out the evaluation effort required. (Anderson & Ball, 1978). (p. 12)

IV. SUCCESSES AND PROBLEMS

Use of evaluation data at ESC-20 is above the national norm. The office's Using Evaluation Data Form was described in the initial issue of Using School Evaluations published by the Center for the Study of

Evaluation at UCLA. On several occasions, the office has been visited by others wishing to learn about its operation. Recently, the federal government selected our site to do a study on use of evaluation findings.

Region 20 Evaluation has been successful working with institutions of higher education, although not at the local level. Despite being the tenth largest city in the United States, San Antonio does not have an institution of higher education granting a PhD. More disappointing, there are no master's degree programs in evaluation or related quantitative areas. Fortunately, the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, located on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, is just an hour and fifteen minutes away. An excellent working relationship has been established with the R and D Center. It has provided Region 20 a technology for measuring and implementing educational programs. Particularly useful has been the Levels of Use methodology whereby focused interviews have been carried out with teachers trained some months earlier. The companion Stages of Concern instrument has been used by Center curriculum staff in planning inservice activity. Region 20 and the R and D Center have cooperatively presented symposia at several conferences, including the American Education Research Association.

The biggest problem confronting Region 20 Evaluation is the lack of a stable funding base. Eighty percent of monies come from evaluating over 50 Center programs, many of which are funded from state and federal competitive grants. The change in educational priorities on the national level has meant the Center is facing a 30 percent cut back in funds for next

year. Evaluation's problems are somewhat more troublesome. Each summer the State of Texas has tried to cut back 30% to 50% of evaluation monies. Evaluation has been seen as a "frill". Surprisingly, the office has withstood the challenges.

Success is credited to the ability of the Executive Director to educate state administrators about the worth of program evaluation. Evaluation findings were reviewed by those affected--program clients and funding agency personnel--as well as board members of the funding and recipient agencies and administration from districts served. Findings were best understood when explained by program staff. Follow-up visitations were usually worthwhile.

What about the future of Region 20 Evaluation? We're optimistic. A strong effort is underway to make the districts aware of Region 20 evaluation services--a problem consistently documented by outsiders evaluating the office. For 1981-82, a variety of services are being offered (See Appendix 2). At this writing, several accounts with new districts have been negotiated for this year and next year. In addition, two small evaluation proposals have been submitted to the National Institute of Education. A long-term goal includes working with the data processing operation, which offers test scoring services to over 200 districts, including 50 in Region 20. An immediate district need is for test interpretation services; provisions to fund this activity are being explored.

What changes need to be made to make research and evaluation offices in intermediate agencies more effective? There simply isn't enough data to adequately answer this question at this time. The 1981 AERA symposia on this topic should suggest definite trends. Is there a pressing issue to be faced by research and evaluation offices in intermediate agencies? Yes. Communication among research and evaluation offices needs to be improved! In Texas, for example, intermediate agency personnel usually belong to one of two groups--the regional arm of AERA, or a smaller, more applied research and planning group. Staff at intermediate agencies were able to cause the two groups to hold their meetings jointly. Better communication, especially among intermediate agency personnel, resulted. At the national level, the formation of a special interest group for regional education service agencies is a start in the right direction. Through cooperation and open communication, workable solutions and unsuccessful alternatives to common problems can be shared. Everyone then benefits.

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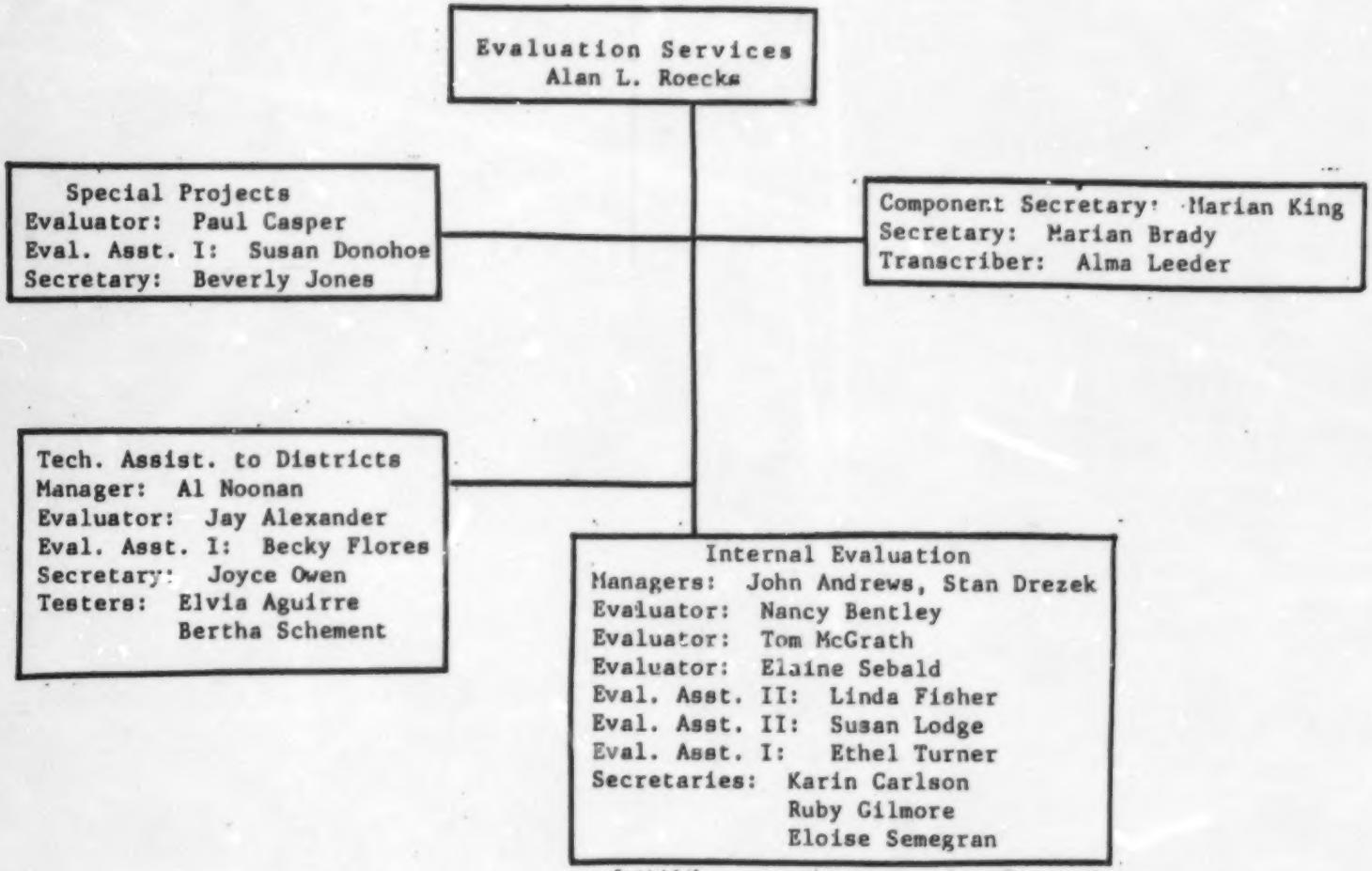
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APPENDIX II
THE USING EVALUATION DATA FORM

The Using Evaluation Data Form (UEDF) is not much more than a blank piece of paper, taken of itself. However, the form represents a psychological lever for getting a programs decision maker to consider major evaluation findings. The form may be used at any point of the evaluation process when sufficient data exists to support a finding deserving of action or reaction by the project staff. By local policy, it is required for inclusion in all end-of-year evaluation reports.

The process of the form's use is initiated when the evaluator lists, in draft form, findings the evaluator desires to be considered for possible action by the project manager. Findings are reported in descriptive rather than judgemental terms. In most instances, the evaluator will discuss these findings with the project manager. Each finding is addressed by the manager, indicating the action already taken, or to be taken. Justification for no action or action contrary to the findings, must be explained. In brief, the "Action" column represents the project manager's reply to the evaluation findings. An example form is attached for review.

What is so ingenious about this process? Not a lot really. The form is effective to the extent that the system requires the program people to commit themselves to a course of action in response to evaluation data. The evaluator then acts as a change agent. The insurance part of the procedure is that the UEDF is maintained for the duration of the program. Commitment to action becomes an addendum to the original evaluation plan.

Probably the greatest feature of the UEDF is the interaction between project staff and evaluator which results, particularly after both parties become familiar and relaxed with its use. If, when the objectives of the program are being drafted, an objective can be included which references the use of the UEDF in program revision, the program will have a build-in assurance for the use of the process.

Using evaluation data continues to be a priority of our office. At this writing, we are considering several alternative ways of documenting use. Any suggestions or effective ways you have found to document use of information would be appreciated.

USING EVALUATION DATA FORM

FINDINGS	ACTION
WORKSHOPS	
A. The participants saw the strengths of the workshops as being the multitude of ideas presented by project staff and the opportunity for teachers to share with one another.	A. The project staff will continue to offer as many different ideas as possible to the teachers. The amount of group work among teachers will be increased. This will include meeting in groups to discuss ideas and suggestions for activities and to work through specific skills presented in the workshop.
B. One of the weaknesses of the workshops was that both the primary (grades 1-3) and intermediate (grades 4-6) teachers believed that the workshops should focus more on the needs of their particular grade level. Several suggested separate workshops for primary and intermediate.	B. When the participants are divided into groups, the groups will be based more on the primary-intermediate classification. Since more group work is planned for next year, teachers will have more of an opportunity to work with others of their same classification. Also, a file of activities will be available to the participants. This file will be organized by grade level so that participants will be able to identify activities that fit the needs of their particular grade.
C. According to the participants, the other weaknesses of the workshops related to different elements of time. They were as follows.	C. (1) Much of the needed theory is now being sent to the participants before the workshop. In this way, they can review it beforehand, and less workshop time is taken up covering this material.
(1) Too much time was spent on theory.	(2) A number of workshops are being scheduled during the summer. The project staff will also continue to try scheduling workshops on inservice days. However, in compliance with requests from school districts, workshops will not be scheduled during school hours, and thus some after school sessions will probably still be necessary.
(2) Workshop should not be scheduled after school.	(3) Make-and Take sessions, where teachers have the opportunity to make classroom materials, will be held again next year, but, given the limited amount of workshop time (10 hours total) and the amount of material to be covered, it appears that little of this time can be allocated to making materials.
(3) Too little time was available to make materials.	

Appendix 3

1981-82

Evaluation Services
to Region 20 Schools

Workshops

Test Interpretation
Writing Measurable Objectives
Overview of Stages of Concern
Preparing Evaluation Sections
Guidelines for Program Evaluation

General Services

Title I Evaluation
Evaluation of Five-Year Priorities Plan
Evaluation of Federal and State Programs
Manpower, Staffing and Services Evaluation
Study of Use of Classroom Time
Staff Development Evaluation

Special Services

Client-Centered Needs Assessment
Instrument Development
Training & Certification in Levels of
Use Interviewing
Statistical Consulting & Data Interpretation
Statistical Processing (SPSS)